

Why Churches Fail: Smyrna

What if I told you that the common denominator of success does not rest upon abilities, timing, who you know, or how much money you have to contribute to the effort?

Many people have had all of these benefits and have succeeded. Some have even had them and failed. Others did not have them at all, yet they still succeeded.

So, what is the common denominator of success? Simply stated the common denominator of success is this: the successful person does what failures don't like to do. What do failures not like to do? I jotted down a couple of notes to contribute to our thoughts.

Failures don't like to work hard, especially when times are difficult. Failures don't like to persevere in difficulty. When trials come their way, and trials will come on life's pathway, especially on the road to success, failures quit.

Someone once said,

"The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary."

Along the way, friends and family members often discourage those who want to succeed, thinking they are being a help to their friend or loved one. But in actuality, they are discouraging us from our efforts.

Yes, failures suffer from the fatigue that comes from hard work, encountering trials and difficulties, along the way, and from resisting those who, in their efforts trying to help us, but really discourage us.

These same issues arise in the day-to-day lives of Christians and the Christian congregations throughout our world today. It has become increasingly difficult to take a stand as a Christian. A dear friend of mine says that the Christian life isn't easy. It's impossible. It's difficult. It's hard.

And the whole world conspires against us today. We face worldwide trials and temptations against Christians, including attacks from Satan and demonic activity. Christians throughout the world suffer from persecution and difficulty, even imprisonment. Hardship confronts Christian congregations throughout every corner of the world.

In the first century, the Lord Jesus wrote a letter to some believers in a city called Smyrna, and He confronted these very issues and encouraged them as they faced hardship and difficulty in their lives. We find that letter recorded for us in Revelation chapter two, verses eight through 11.

According to Kitto, a Bible scholar and author, Smyrna sat on the southwest section of Asia (now Turkey), a port city on the Aegean Sea. The city experienced many earthquakes down through history. Yet each time the inhabitants rebuilt the city. Now called Izmir, the city includes believers today.

No biblical record describes the foundation of the Christian assembly in Smyrna. Acts 18:8-10 tells of Paul's and his associates teaching ministry in Ephesus and the expansion into all of Asia. This expansion doubtless included Smyrna only a few miles north of Ephesus.

Christ's Letter To Believers In Smyrna

Revelation of Christ

In His message to believers in Smyrna, Christ began with a revelation of Himself. We read that in verse number eight of Revelation, chapter two.

"And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write these things. These things sayeth the first and the last, which was dead and is alive. I know your works in your tribulation."

Jesus wanted His believers in the city of Smyrna to understand some things about Himself and reveals His nature to them. These brief little words found in verse number eight and the beginning of number nine He says,

"I am the first and the last."

This description occurs five times in the Bible in reference to Christ. It reveals that He is eternal, self-

existing from eternity past into eternity in the future, without beginning or ending. Since on God possesses self-existence and eternity, Christ declares His deity. He became God in the flesh, and enjoys eternity in His life. He is deity. He is God.

Because He is God, He possesses sovereignty over all things, events and people alike.

Then we read also that He was dead and is alive. This statement confirms what the scriptures reveal throughout them in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament: Jesus Christ is the Savior. The Serpent Slayer promised by God in Genesis chapter three is none other than Jesus the Son of God, the Savior of sinners. God sent His Son to die as an atoning sacrifice for sin, dying on behalf of people other than Himself. And He came alive again from the dead.

The scriptures confirm that as we read in the gospels, in historians' records for us, and we read in first Corinthians chapter 15, the wonderful news of the resurrection of Christ. When He arose from the dead, he rose victorious over sin and death and destroyed all the works of the devil.

His resurrection proves to us that one day He will be the judge over all the earth, over everyone from the beginning of history, till the end of it. Scriptures tell us in Acts 17.31 that because of His resurrection from the dead, He showed proof that He will be the judge of all people at the end of ages.

So, we read very quickly in verse number eight, a number of features and characteristics of the nature of Christ. He is deity, He is the first and the last, He's eternal without beginning and without end, He's the Savior all, Who will judge all people at the end of the world.

At the beginning of verse number nine, Jesus gives the Christians in Smyrna another feature of His nature:

"I know your works..."

He is omniscient. Christ knew their tribulation and difficulties. He knows all things. Nothing happened or came into their lives that He did not know.

These are just a few of the characteristics of God that Christ revealed here in His nature. As He writes to His friends at Smyrna, He tells them what He knows about the believers in Smyrna. And He has some interesting comments to make about them.

Recognition of their character

We read in verse number nine, *"I know your works."* They worked very hard for Christ, for His honor and glory while facing great difficulty. And we read some of the difficulties there. It says in tribulation, and in the midst of poverty. These were not financially wealthy people. These were poor people. They lived in poverty.

Although poor in money Christ called them rich: rich toward Christ, rich in works, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom of Christ.

And then it says that they endured the blasphemy of people around them, who said they were believers, but were not. Christ said,

"I know the blasphemy of them, which say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."

There were people around the city and perhaps, even in the congregation of believers, in Smyrna who professed that they were believers and followers of Christ, but they were not. They were fakes. They were professors. They professed that they believed, but in reality, they did not.

In fact, Christ describes them in very strong terms. Christ said they belonged to the synagogue of satan. They were worse than those who came along and pretended to have a good life and lived a good life. Christ called them members of the congregation in the synagogue of satan.

After His commendation, Christ outlined for them something they probably didn't want to hear. He told them that they would face some difficulties you had ahead. In fact, we read in verse number 10,

"Fear none of those things, which you shall suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that you may be tried and you'll have tribulation 10 days, but be faithful unto death. And I will give you the crown of life."

Christ here warned them ahead of time. You think it's difficult now. More difficulties face you in the future. Some of you will be cast into prison, and the devil will take your lives. There'll be times when persecution would become difficult and that will cause death to come. But He said don't fear those things.

The time of persecution is limited. It's not going to be forever. He used the phrase "10 days." We don't know whether it was a literal 10 days or whether that was a figurative time period. It would be just a short period of time that they would endure these trials and difficulties.

But Christ, in the midst of commending them for their faithfulness and for their perseverance in the midst of poverty and tribulation and difficulty forewarned them that difficult times still lay ahead, but to remain faithful.

In summary, Christ did not rebuke them for sinful behavior. Nor did He direct them to conform to the culture around them in an attempt to win the culture. Further, faithfulness to Christ did not bring them monetary wealth nor immunity from trials. He did praise them for their Christ honoring works and persistent faithfulness in the midst of persecution from a heretical culture, and their poverty.

They persisted. They resisted the enemy, the devil, who conspired against them and brought false believers into their midst and tempted them with those hardships. They didn't give in to the temptation to somehow give in to the culture about them and to the world about them hoping that somehow that might change things. No, yielding to the culture would not have helped them.

Christ encouraged them and praised them for their faithfulness, works, persistence, and resistance against satan's attacks against them.

Reward for believers

Before concluding His message, Christ promised them a reward listed in verse 10-11. He said to those who remained faithful to the very end, even through death, they would receive a crown of life.

Now, theologians have disputed over the years, whether that is a literal crown that they would wear on their heads or whether that was a kind of a picture of eternal life. Either way, it speaks of a reward that Christ promised them for their faithfulness and perseverance under trial and difficulty. He confirmed a little later on in the next verse that in fact they would experience eternal life.

So, whether it is a picture or a literal crown, Christ promised them a reward for their faithfulness and their endurance under stress and hardship. He described it in this fashion,

"If you're faithful unto death, you'll receive a crown of life. And then he says, he, that hath an ear. Let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. He that overcome with shall not be hurt by the second death."

What's the second death? That's the death that many people who claim to be preachers of the gospel today refuse to discuss. We read of it later on in the book of Revelation. When Christ the Judge separates the sheep from the goats, the believers from the unbelievers, the unbelievers, the goats, are cast into the fire that burns forever. That is the second death.

Christ promised these believers that if they would remain faithful to Him throughout their difficulties overcoming the temptations and the persecution that would come their way, He would give them a crown of life. Furthermore, they will not participate in the second death, but would experience eternal life.

Purpose of Christ's Letter

Why did God send this message through Christ His Son? Why did He have John deliver it to them? What purpose and function did it play in the lives of believers of Smyrna?

First, it gave them instruction. It revealed to them the nature of Jesus Christ. He gave them some very clear direction and explanation as to His nature: eternality and self-existence, the first and the last; His deity; His sovereignty; His omniscience; and He is the Savior. He's the coming judge. And those things would encourage and comfort those believers as they endured the difficulties that came along their way.

Second, He encouraged them in the midst of their difficulties to not give up, don't quit. Be faithful and you'll receive a crown of life. The culture was evil and satanic. It tells us, furthermore, he describes them as poor; they're living in poverty.

In other words, He was revealing to them that faithfulness to Christ does not always bring financial reward. And to them it did not. They were faithful believers, but they lived in poverty. And furthermore, the fact that they were faithful to Christ did not bring immunity from difficulty in hardship. In fact, it was the very cause of their difficulty and hardship.

Christ wrote this letter to them, sent it by way of John, the apostle John to the believers at Smyrna, to commend them for their works and faithfulness in the midst of poverty, tribulation, and a demonically controlled culture. His words comforted and encouraged them to press on in the midst of difficulty and hardship, and to comfort them that it would only be a short time. It wouldn't last forever, 10 days.

We've read here about the nature of Christ as revealed in this letter, we've read about the character of the people, the believers in the city of Smyrna. And we've read about the warning that Christ gave to them as well as the promise for faithfulness to the end.

Correlation To You And Me

I'm sure as we've thought about these people in the city of Smyrna we wondered about them thought, what does that have to do with me? How does that correlate to our day and age today? We kind of have the phrase very popular today, don't we: 'What's in it for me?' What do I get out of this?'

Well, there is a very strong correlation between the message that Christ gave to the believers in Smyrna and our day today. Everything that was true then is true now. We encounter worldwide persecution of believers and Christ followers. We see imprisonment of believers in many parts of the world. We see people all throughout the world in various lands, some places where you wouldn't even suspect it, believers thrown into prison and suffer great difficulty and hardship because of their faith in Christ. And it's hard for us to understand these things as to why Christ would allow them to happen, but they do.

And they've happened throughout history, but we have the promises and the assurance that Christ gave to those believers in Smyrna that we have for us today as well. We have an idea, a concept and understanding. We have a knowledge of Who Christ is, and He's the same today, yesterday and forever.

And what He said about Himself to those believers that we read in verses eight and nine, about the fact that He was the beginning in the end, He was dead and came to life again. Those same things are true about Christ today. He is still deity. He is still eternal in His life. He still is going to be the judge. He still is the Savior. He still is omniscient. He knows your circumstances and mine. And He understands and encourages us as He encouraged them remain faithful in the midst of trials and tribulations.

It's hard. I know it's difficult, but it's only going to be a short time. Our lives are but a breath, the scriptures tell us. Hang in there is the message. Don't quit, remain faithful. Those who overcome, they'll receive a crown of life, and they will not experience the second death. That promise holds true for believers today, as well as believers in that first century, in the city of Smyrna.

Believers today can experience victory over the culture. We can even know victory over the enemy of our souls, the devil because Christ overcame Him, destroyed all his works, and gives to Christians the full armor of God to protect us against the devil's attacks. (Ephesians 6.10-18) Furthermore, God has transferred us from the powers of darkness into the kingdom of His Son, Jesus. (Colossians 1.13)

So those same truths that Christ gave to the believers in Smyrna we can also hold onto in our hour, day and age. They can encourage us, and they can comfort us as well as it did those believers.

Why do some Christians and Christian congregations fail while others flourish? Unlike the church at Smyrna, they fail because they do not trust God in the midst of their fatigue from service to others, the trials of life, frustration of poverty, and the mockery of evil doers.

But, the Church at Smyrna did not fail but flourished. Like Smyrna, a Christian and a Christian assembly flourishes when it trusts Christ in the midst of poverty, persecution, and provocation from people and culture under the influence of satan.

Response

Therefore, how will you respond to these truths? What implications do they have upon your life and upon mine?

Let's presume for the moment that you are a believer in Christ. You are a follower of Christ and experience a difficult time facing hardship, trial, and temptation from time to time, plus the attack of the enemy, the devil. He wants to disrupt and interfere in your life with those trials. They came to those believers, and they come in our day as well.

I encourage you with the same message that Christ gave to those believers in Smyrna. Be faithful to the end, trust Christ in the midst of your trials and tribulations. His nature and character have not changed over the years. He still is the eternal one. He still is the one who was dead and is now alive. He is the savior. He will be the judge, and He is aware of your circumstances and is aware of your life.

He knows your circumstances, and you can find encouragement from Him. I encourage you as Christ the believers in Smyrna. Did those believers remain faithful trust Christ in the midst of your difficulty, in hardship, in your trials and poverty? Yes. Sometimes facing imprisonment? Yes.

Even if those days and those times confront you, Christ can provide comfort and encouragement and enable you to endure difficulty, as He says for a short time.

Christ delivers us from this present evil world (Galatians 1.4). He knows that we do not fight against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces (Ephesians 6.10; 2 Corinthians 10.3; 1 John 5.19) He has provided spiritual armor to protect us from the forces of evil (1 Peter 5.8; Ephesians 6.10-18) The devil flees when a child of God resists him (James 4.7). We can walk in victory in this present evil, persecuting world.

Where do you stand? Do you yield to evil or trust in Christ for deliverance? I find great encouragement every day from the indwelling presence of Christ and the victory over evil that He accomplished in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God the Father. You can too.

I pray that you will turn from the temptations and trials of this world and trust in Christ your Savior and Serpent Slayer.

Now, let's presume for a moment that you are not a believer in Christ. You are not a Christ follower. In fact, all of your life has been marked by your resistance to God and to Christ and anything having to do with Christianity, Christ, or the Bible. You've had no interest whatsoever in pursuing it, or looking at it, or having anyone discuss it with you.

Well, I'm not surprised. That's how sinners act. We are born that way. We are born with a sinful nature. We are born with a repulsion of God. The scriptures call us enemies of God. That's how we're born.

That's how I was born. That's how everyone from Adam and Eve, since Adam and Eve, that's how everyone, since they have been born in sin, have no interest in God, and have no interest in Christ. In fact, our sinful natures create a chasm between us and God which we cannot bridge, nor do we want to span it. We need divine intervention in our lives to turn us from our evil ways and reconcile us to God.

But you're still here. You're still watching and reading. God in His sovereignty has enabled you, given you the interest, and the desire to see what what's this guy got to say. I want to see what he's going to bring about in the conclusion.

Well, here's God's word to you. God's word to you is that He has provided a substitute for you because you are completely unable and do not possess any desire to bridge the gap between you and God, and it exists. It's there. A separation exists between God and you because of your sin, and you don't want to go there. You can't. You may have even tried to reform your life and that's difficult. Isn't it? It's impossible.

The Christian life isn't difficult. It's impossible. It's only something that the divine activity of God in your life can produce. God's message to you tells you that He's provided a substitute, His Son, His only Son. He gave His Son as a substitute on behalf of people like you and me, sinners like us. He lived a perfect life. He did not sin. He did not lie, cheat, steal, or commit immorality in mind or act.

Because of His life, He died the death that He died, which was a substitutionary death. He died on behalf of other people, not because of His own sin. God, the Father, accepted that sacrifice on behalf of people like you and like me. The scriptures tell us, Jesus Himself has said, everyone who comes to God the Father through faith in Christ, He will accept. God will forgive. He will pardon. He will make a child of God. He will even send His very nature to live and reside within them, enabling them to live that life, which they cannot live on their own. That requires divine power within them.

I pray that the spirit of God will come to you today and give to you that new life, that divine life, the life that only God Himself provides. I pray that He will enable you to believe and trust Christ for yourself as your substitute, as the One Who died in your behalf to cover the sin that you've committed throughout your life.

You will find that God will pardon you, forgive you, reconcile you to Himself, bridge the chasm that exists between you and God, and adopt you as His child. He will enable you to face and endure the difficulties and hardships that will come your way throughout the rest of your life.

When you remain faithful, as He will enable you to live, you will receive a crown of life. You will not participate in that second death that comes to all those who reject Christ and refuse the offer that God has made available through faith in Christ.

Come Spirit of God to these needy ones today and give them that new life in Christ that will change you, transform you, make you into a child of God, enable you to live free from the world and its temptations, that will enable you to resist and stand against the devil, and live victoriously over his taunts and his oppression.

I pray that the spirit of God will come to you today and give you this new life.